Using E-mail in the EFL Class

By Orly Sela

This article is a response to Mario Rinvolucri's request (*English Teaching Forum* , Vol. 33, No. 3) for teachers to suggest ways of using letter writing in the EFL class. It presents the idea of using computers and modems to send electronic mail, or as it is usually known, e-mail, back and forth between classes of students in different parts of the world. This article is made up of three parts. The first part explains the idea of e-mail with its advantages and disadvantages as compared to a regular pen-pal program. The second part explains how it works and discusses some of the issues involved in using it in the EFL class. The third part reports my experience in using e-mail for two years with one of my classes.

Using E-mail

Letter writing and reading can be a very successful and motivating communicative activity. In this article I would like to suggest a different way of using letter writing in class-i.e. via e-mail. This is an electronic means of communication used by people all over the world. One person writes a letter on his or her computer and sends it via the modem to another person anywhere in the world, who receives the letter via his/her modem and computer.

In the last few years e-mail has been used in education in general, and in EFL classes in particular, all over the world. It presents an alternate and innovative version to the old pen-pal programs. The e-mail program has several advantages over regular pen-pal programs, as well as some drawbacks. One advantage of using e-mail is that the students acquire the skill of word processing if they are not familiar with it yet, and get plenty of practice if they are. Electronic mail is also quicker than regular mail, and if used properly can be motivating simply through the technical innovativeness of the idea. On the other hand, the same technical ability can cause problems and hinder the flow of letters due to any number of software or hardware problems. I believe that on the whole the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages, and an e-mail pen-pal proj-ect can become a very worthwhile and rewarding activity.

How is it Done?

At the beginning of the year the teacher finds another teacher in another country who is interested in exchanging letters. This can be done easily through various educational networks available on the Internet. Once the initial contact is made, the correspondence begins. The students in one school write letters to the students in the other school. The teacher collects these letters and e-mails them (via the modem) to the other teacher, who gives them to his or her students to answer. He or she then collects the students' letters and sends them back to the first teacher, and so on.

This project can be done in one of two ways. The first one is a personal one-on- one communication, where one student from one class corresponds with one student from the other class. The alternative is to send all the letters en masse to the other class, where they are read by all the students, and answers are written to a different student each time or to the entire group (Backer 1995). Each of these alternatives has its advantages and disadvantages, but both are feasible methods of using e-mail in the EFL class.

The personal communication version has the advantage of being just that- personal. If good rapport is established between two students, this can be the most exciting thing in the world. If, however, the "chemistry" between the students does not work, the whole project fails. Also, there is the danger that some students in the class will not receive their letters while others will, which can cause disappointment and frustration.

The second version of e-mail letter writing attempts to overcome these problems. As each student corresponds with a student of his/her choice, or with the whole group, frustration is avoided and motivation raised. Another advantage is that each student reads many letters instead of one, which makes for a large quantity of authentic reading practice. The drawback of this "pooled" version is the possible loss of the personal touch, which is a basic ingredient of "real life" letter writing. Some of the authenticity is lost here as well.

To date, there is no conclusive evidence as to which alternative produces better results, although there is some evidence pointing towards the second, "pooled," version (Backer 1995). It is up to the individual teacher to choose the alternative that seems most suitable to his or her class.

There are two more issues that need to be addressed regarding the use of e-mail in the EFL classroom. The first one concerns correction of the letters. The teacher may choose to send them as they are written, to correct only those errors that hinder communication, or to make the students correct all their errors before sending the letters. The correction policy should be chosen according to the class in question and to the teacher's aims in using this technique. Whatever policy is used, the word processor will prove to be a tremendously useful tool.

The other issue is the availability of computers. Most schools do not have enough computers for all the students to work with at one time. In many communities, computers are accessible to the students at home, and the letter writing may be assigned as homework. If that is not the case, a solution must be found within the school.

One Teacher's Experience

I would like to share my experience in using e-mail with my students. I teach in a kibbutz regional high school in the north of Israel. In the past two years I have used an e-mail correspondence program with one of my classes (an A level class throughout their 9th and 10th grade years). We corresponded with an equivalent class from Ohio, USA. I used the one-on-one version referred to above, as the personal and authentic element seemed to me to be of the utmost importance. Each of my students had a pen-pal and they corresponded for two years.

I had my students write their letters at home, as I did not have enough computers available in school, and all the students had a computer at home or could easily get to one. As I had a fairly high level class, I did not correct their letters unless they asked me to or unless the error was so blatant it obstructed understanding.

Due to technical difficulties, we only managed to send five letters and receive five letters each year. That was not as many as I had hoped for, but nevertheless most students managed to create a personal relationship with their American pen-pals.

Topics of discussion centered mostly on their different life styles. (What exactly is a kibbutz? What is a school band?) Quite a lot of personal information was also exchanged about families, hobbies, modern music, etc. An interesting by- product of this project was that the American class became extremely interested in Israel. In the second year of the project their school offered a special course about the Middle East as a direct result of our correspondence.

Student responses to this project were varied. Some complained about the extra work involved and were negative towards the whole idea, seeing it as one more way for the teacher to take over their spare time. Others were very enthusiastic, and waited eagerly for their letters to arrive. Three girls became so attached to their American pen-pals that they ended the year (and the project) by exchanging addresses and agreeing to continue their correspondence through regular mail. All in all, I think the project was a success. All the students, even the unenthusiastic ones, took part in an authentic correspondence with a native-speaker, and communicated with him or her in English.

I would like to end this article with a few excerpts from the letters my students wrote to their American pen-pals. I chose passages that are typical in content and language level. The letters are given as they were written, including the errors.

"I write to you at home with my own computer. Really, did you think my teacher will give a free time from learning to write these letters!"

"Kibbutz is something like a village. We are 700 people that live in partnership, we own some factories. we work in the kibbutz and we get a budget. We don't pay for electricity, water, for the house..But don't think we are primitives we have all the things you have and we are not poor."

"I like very much writing to you-it is very interesting knowing about you."

"Life in Israel is very very similar to life in U.S.A. except the security problem, of course. We do not live a primitive life, we do have movie theatres, T.V. and V.C.R.s."

"I wonder, why is it so important to you to go to Miami University? what is so special about this University?"

"Israel is a Jewish country so we don't celebrate Christmas although it looks like a very fun holiday!"

"I read your list of subjects that you are going to take next year. Me and my friend (I don't want to take all the responsibility on me) advise you to take only regular American history. it's enough worthless knowledge."

As you can see from these excerpts, the language level is fairly high, and there is certainly authentic communication going on. What else can we ask for? I recommend using the e-mail pen-pal programs with students of all levels and ages. It is not too much work for the teacher, and certainly gets a high mark on any cost effectiveness scale I know. Try it, you won't be sorry!

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References

- Backer, J. 1995. E-mail in the Israeli EFL class. (Unpublished article.)